Spring 2020

"How Did You Get Here?": Using Counter-Narratives and Critical Race Theory to Explore the Placement Experiences of Black Males in Self-Contained Special Education Settings

Xandria Renata Sutton

"How Did You Get Here?": Using Counter-Narratives and Critical Race Theory to Explore the Placement Experiences of Black Males in Self-Contained Special Education Settings

by

Xandria Renata Sutton

Bachelor of Science
University of Florida, 2009

Master of Science
Capella University, 2015

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in

Curriculum Studies

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2020

Accepted by:

Rhonda Jeffries, Major Professor

Todd Lilly, Major Professor

Terrance McAdoo, Committee Member

Analisa Smith, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my students, all of them, current and past. Thank you for the motivation, the support and the many lessons learned. You are the reason.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee for their dedication to my research project. Your feedback and support have provided me with the confidence and abilities to continue this project. Thank you for aiding me in the completion of this process. A special thank you goes to Dr. Todd Lilly for providing me with powerful resources and asking challenging questions.

I would also like to thank my family, my husband, my children and my mother. To my husband, Adrian Sutton, thank you for being a sounding board and for providing me with the space and time to complete this process. For my children, Braedyn and Bakari, thank you for being so amazingly understanding during all of the late nights and weekends that I spent away from you while in the library.

ABSTRACT

The special education system in the United States is disproportionately overrepresented by Black males. This is increasingly true for high-incidence disability types, such as emotional/behavioral disorders and specific learning disabilities. It also rings true that those same disability types are those that are most often placed in restrictive special education settings such as the self-contained classroom. Based on research, students placed in restrictive settings often have limited educational opportunities and poorer lifelong outcomes (Rueter, 2011). It is for those reasons that it is important that we examine the reasons for the decades long continuation of the overrepresentation of Black males in such restrictive settings and the experiences of those most impacted. This action research study makes use of the voices of Black male students impacted by the noted disproportionality to understand their educational experiences, the reasons that they believe they have been placed in self-contained classrooms and uses their words to analyze this phenomenon through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). The resulting research of this study suggests that Black males understand that race may have impacted their experience, diagnosis and subsequent placement. These developments can help to provide the foundation toward challenging a problem that has long plagued special education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADHD ..... Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

CLS ..... Critical Legal Studies

CRP ..... Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

CRT ..... Critical Race Theory

EAHCA ..... Education for All Handicapped Children Act

EHA ..... Education for the Handicapped Act

EBD ..... Emotional/Behavioral Disability

FAPE ..... Free and Appropriate Public Education

IDEA ..... Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IEP ..... Individualized Education Program

LRE ..... Least Restrictive Environment

SLD ..... Specific Learning Disability

SLI ..... Speech Language Impairment

SNAP ..... Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

TANF ..... Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I entered the classroom as a career changer and special education teacher just over four years ago. From the onset of my new career and quite to my surprise, I was faced with classrooms which were full of Black boys. In my third year, I achingly joked with a colleague that I was a "teacher of Black boys." For me, these were boys that appeared to exhibit fairly normal behavior and rates of learning. The joke followed me as I changed schools, as I changed grade levels and even as I changed classroom types. I found that the students I encountered were both relatively well-behaved and generally eager to learn, despite the horror stories that preceded them. It was not until my fourth year as a teacher that I experienced teaching a girl and students who identified racially as something other than Black. This personal experience has fueled my quest to better understand the high rates of Black boys placed in special education classes, especially those placed in restrictive settings like the self-contained classroom.

Beginning as early as pre-kindergarten, the intersectionality, or overlapping of social identities, places African-American male students at increased educational risk (Rashid, 2009). Educational limitations and lowered expectations often result in referral to and treatment for special education services (Barbarin, 2015). African-American males are significantly more likely to be referred for special education services and

diagnosed with high-incidence behavioral and learning disorders when compared to white male peers (Clark, 2007).

A disconnect between student culture and the structure of formalized education creates challenges in educational and behavioral compliance for Blacks and other minority students (Echevarria, Powers & Elliot, 2004). Schools generally employ teachers and materials that are not aligned with the cultural experiences and expectations of many minority students (Echevarria, Powers & Elliot, 2004). With the education profession being composed mostly of white females, biases and implicit racism generally are unchallenged over extended periods of time, having an expansive impact on educational experiences and outcomes (Monroe, 2006). Without appropriate measures to help prevent and alleviate these behaviors, male minorities tend to continue to fare poorly (Barbarin, 2015).

The devaluation of culture, in addition to a decrease in academic and behavioral expectations, impacts overall educational experience. The experience of boys of color gives way to internalized oppression, lowered self-esteem and a poorer outlook on life (Ladson-Billings, 2011). To have one's home life align with their school life is not typically a privilege experienced by boys of color. Black male students report an overall lack of respect within the school community and are subjected to instructional methods that fail to effectively allow students to connect content and instructional styles with daily life (West-Olatunji, Baker & Brooks, 2006). Students also report an awareness of race and racial inequities that exist in the structures of education (West-Olatunji, Baker & Brooks, 2006).

One particularly troubling racial inequity exists in the area of school discipline, specifically related to exclusionary practices. Black male students are disciplined at excessive rates, even when displaying behaviors identical to their non-minority peers (Monroe, 2006). Black male students also experience harsher disciplinary actions, resulting in increased time outside of the classroom (Monroe, 2006). Disparities in the educational experiences of Black male students impact life beyond school as boys of color tend to have a diminished concept of self and often discard their goals and dreams when faced with the continued experience of failure and lowered expectations in education (McDougal, 2009). As adults, Black men continue to fall behind in areas that other minority groups are making some gains in, including employment and college graduation rates, while steadily increasing in rates of incarceration and joblessness (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the disproportionality of Black males in special education is both "logical and predictable" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.68). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) list the following tenets of CRT,

1. A belief that racism is normal
2. Interest convergence
3. Race as a social construct
4. Intersectionality
5. Voice/counter-narrative

Critical race theory challenges the idea of color-blindness in education, both in policy and in instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Viewing the overrepresentation of Black boys through this lens allows for recognition of the racial differences that exist and prompts

my exploration of the experiences of boys of color. It provides context for the continued challenges that face educators in meeting the varied needs of Black male students. Critical race theory allows for the viewing of race and racism as a permanent and salient facet in the lives of Black boys and the education that they receive (Ladson-Billings, 2011). CRT also emphasizes notions of inquiry and voice through the development of counternarratives that work to interrupt structures that maintain racism (Dixon & Anderson, 2018).

Problem of Practice

Black males are disproportionately placed within special education, often in the most restrictive of self-contained settings, negatively impacting their educational experiences and overall outlook on life.

Research Question

The goal of this action research is to address the following question: What are the educational and placement experiences of Black male students impacted by disproportionate overrepresentation in self-contained educational settings? This question will be addressed through the following research objectives:

1. To identify the reasons that Black males believe that they have been placed in self-contained special education settings, using their voice.
2. To identify themes that help to explain the experiences of Black male students placed in self-contained special education classrooms.
3. To analyze the disproportionate overrepresentation of Black male students in self-contained special education classrooms through the lens of CRT, based on the voice and lived experiences of members of the targeted population.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research study will be to understand the overall educational experiences of Black male students within a self-contained special education classroom at Berry High School. This study will also seek to determine the reasons that Black male students of Berry High School believe they were placed in and remain in self-contained special education settings.

Grounded in the tenets of Critical Race Theory, this action research study employs qualitative research methods, as students will be interviewed and will work to produce a narrative related to educational placement and experience. The purpose of the interview is to better understand the lived experiences of Black male students, with special interest paid to their educational experiences and overall outlook on life, within and outside of the school community. A focus group and an additional semi-structured interview will be conducted to determine the underlying reasons that resulted in each participant's placement in special education and how placement has impacted them. Additionally, the interviews will seek to understand the student's perspective on their overall educational experience and outlook, as well as specific educational policies and instructional methods related to their successes and failures in the school setting.

Significance of the Study

Based on my personal experiences in the classroom, as well as the well-documented phenomenon of disproportionate overrepresentation of Black males in special education, I believe that it is important for research to include the voices of those most impacted, the young Black males who populate my classroom. While not always generalizable, small scale qualitative research can inform practice and future research

(Mertler, 2013). Practitioner inquiry is one type of action research that seeks to inform the practice of the participant-researcher through cyclical processes of inquiry and reflection. This research will reflect this model of inquiry as the goal is to collect and analyze data, as opposed to typically held action research in which a specific intervention is developed and implemented (Dana, 2013).

It is my belief that the personal narratives created by qualitative studies work to deconstruct and reframe the problem in ways that humanize those most impacted. The data gathered from inquiry-based action research and the development of student-centered counternarratives allows for professional educators to begin to move away from deficit thinking and toward change in support of increased efficacy in the practice of educating Black male children.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of information related to the disproportionate overrepresentation of Black males identified with high-incidence disability types and placed in self-contained settings. Understanding the information contained in this literature review will allow for a better understanding of the problem of practice, as well as the methods used in an attempt to understand this problem. It is necessary to understand the history related to the field of special education, especially for children identified as having high-incidence disability types such as is the case with emotional/behavioral disabilities and specific learning disability types for Black males. This area of special education comes with its own problems and specific needs that must be further identified and researched in an effort to aid this population of students in the attainment of an effective education. The materials contained in this review support historical understandings as well as the general theoretical understanding of how Black male students learn and view their experiences in special education settings.

In addition to background knowledge, it is also important to consider how others have gone about obtaining information in an effort to understand and solve for similar problems of practice. The review of research related to the methodologies of other research will allow for sound development of new research methodologies and the ability

to enhance the current knowledge base with new information. It is important for research to be able to build upon prior research so that practitioners and research-practitioners may make improvements in future practice.

Key Concepts

Throughout the research a number of key concepts and themes will be addressed, requiring a brief understanding of each is necessary to best understand the intent and result of the stated research question. To begin, it is necessary to understand the type of research that is being carried out. Action research can be defined as "a systemic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives" (Stringer, 2014, p.1). A similar definition is provided by Mertler (2013), as he applies action research to the field of education and states that action research is done "by teachers for themselves," in an effort to improve personal effectiveness. Action research differs from traditional research methods in that it typically does not seek to generalize to larger populations, although it has been known to influence inquiry based research (Stringer, 2014). This method of research does not follow the scientific method, rather it makes use of various cyclical models that require the researcher to continuously plan, act and reflect (Mertler, 2013). Reflection is vital to the action research process as it involves critically thinking about one's actions and decisions. Researchers must be able to be actively involved in the process to collect and analyze data and to think through the decision-making process. The type of action research to be used in this research is deemed practitioner inquiry. Inquiry based research seeks explanations as opposed to solutions that are typically the focus of action research (Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford & Waff, 2009).

This research will also refer a great deal to disability categories identified and serviced by special education providers. The term high-incidence disability refers to the most commonly diagnosed disability types. These disability types include emotional and behavioral disorder(s), or simply EBD, as well as specific learning disabilities which will be referred to as SLD. Black male students are identified in high rates for these disability category types. Students classified as EBD are identified and placed based on social characteristics, and generally display extreme externalizing or internalizing behaviors, such as withdrawal, aggression or impulse control (Lane, Wehby, Little & Cooley, 2005). Students with SLD are those students that display mild limitations that contribute to a decrease in their ability to access standards-based curriculum without additional support (Tucker, 1980). SLD can include such disabilities as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dysgraphia and various processing disorders.

Historical Perspectives

Special education was created to address the various needs of increasingly diverse populations of students (Kauffman, 2014). In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was created and put into place to support the needs of students with disabilities, a population that was steadily growing at the time (Yell, 2016). EAHCA, which was an amendment to the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) of 1970, provided additional federal funds to states to ensure the servicing of students in specific disability categories (Yell, 2016). EAHCA has since evolved and was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Ford & Russo, 2016). IDEA requires that students meet a four-pronged eligibility determination

to receive fully-funded special education services; students must be (1) aged 3-21, (2) have a specifically identified disability type, (3) in need of specialized education services and (4) offered related services (Ford & Russo, 2016). Once eligibility is determined, students with special needs are provided the right to proper evaluation, free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (Yell, 2016). The disproportionate overrepresentation of Black males in specific disability categories and restrictive settings suggests that they may not be provided the same level of required service as mandated by IDEA.

The idea of LRE, or least restrictive environment, brought to fruition the idea of public education for all, despite disability type (Wood, 2001). LRE is a mandate that states students with disabilities are required to be educated with peers that do not have disabilities to the fullest extent possible (Yell, 2016). According to this mandate, students are only to be removed when the nature and/or severity of their disability is so extreme that the cannot be educated in the general education setting and even then, it is expected that students placed in restrictive settings are provided opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers (Yell, 2016). LRE is a major feature of IDEA and a marked change from the treatment that students with disabilities received prior to its passage. Prior to the 1950s, students identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders were not serviced within schools, rather they were supported in hospitals and other institutions that were developed specifically for mentally challenged populations (Wood, 2001).

In 1963, the term “learning disability” was introduced to the field of special education, and attributed to children who encountered a difficulty with learning but seemed otherwise non-handicapped (Tucker, 1980). This category of special education

has been one of the fastest growing categories of special education since its inception in the 1960s, especially for Black males (Tucker, 1980). The learning disability category eventually evolved to become what is now labeled as specific learning disability (SLD), to further define disability type and establish increasingly effective instructional methods for the targeted populations.

Historically, the field of EBD has always brought about great confusion and controversy based on how it is defined as well as how we provide services to students within this category of special education (Merrell & Walker, 2004). The definition of EBD, as provided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act states that emotionally disturbed students are to display one or more of the following five conditions over an extended period of time,

1. An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors.
2. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
3. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions.
4. A general, pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or fears associated with personal or school problems. (Merrell & Walker, 2004)

Such definition causes a great deal of concern as it lacks precision of clarity and ease of classification (Merrell & Walker, 2004). Many students could seemingly be classified as EBD based on an educators' observations of or interactions with the students (Wood, 2001). The definition also includes behaviors that include a considerable amount of

variability, ranging from internalizing behaviors to externalizing behaviors, which are not actually identified within the definition (Merrell & Walker, 2004). This is particularly concerning when reviewing national statistics surrounding disability identification which reports that Black males are three times as likely as peers to be identified as EBD.

One of the biggest concerns related to the field of EBD, is the lack of focus on academics, despite being within the field of education (Kauffman, 2014). Unlike other areas of special education, EBD attempts to fuse together the disciplines of education and mental health, which rarely come together successfully; there exists an interdisciplinary divide that neither side truly knows how to navigate (Teagarden, Zabel & Kuff, 2015). Historically, teacher educators trained in the area of EBD were thought of as teacher-therapists, and were to provide limited academic services and relied a great deal on students spending a significant amount of time outside of the classroom attending to mental health needs (Wood, 2001). With a great deal of focus placed on the behavioral and emotional needs of the students, educational needs have fallen to the wayside.

Special education, specifically EBD special education, has also lacked in scientific research (Kauffman, 2014). This field is not often thought of as an area requiring special attention or having the ability to benefit from specific research. Research in the area of EBD is essentially non-existent, requiring the field to rely on and modify research from various fields such as psychology and other social science disciplines to put into best practice in the classroom (Kauffman, 2014). The idea of inclusion, coupled with poor classification methods resulted in a field that aims for general education standards, and fails to truly embrace the much needed notion of specialized education.

Current Status & Challenges in Special Education

According to the National Center for Education Statistics for the 2017-2018 school year, nearly 13% of the US population of students, aged 3-21, are receiving special education services, with 5% of these students identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD); this represents an increase in identification of emotional and behavioral disorders in students. Of this 5%, Black male students represent a great percentage as they are 3 times as likely to be identified as EBD according to national reporting statistics. Students with EBD are identified and placed based on social characteristics; these students are those that are likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors that are deemed socially inappropriate and have the ability in impeded learning, such as aggression and other impulsive behaviors (Lane, Wehby, Little & Cooley, 2005). In addition to externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors such as social withdrawal and a severe difficulty in forming and maintaining appropriate relationships may also result in students being identified as EBD (Lane, Wehby, Little & Cooley, 2005). Unlike other categories of special education, such as intellectual disabilities, students identified as EBD often display varied levels of academic functioning, ranging from gifted to having severe academic deficits (Mattison & Blader, 2013). Despite varied academic functioning, over half of EBD students are serviced outside of the general education environment, many placed in the most restrictive of environments, including residential treatment programs (Lane, Wehby, Little & Cooley, 2005).

Information provided by the National Center for Education Statistics for the 2017-2018 school year, reveals that 34% of the student population has been identified as having a specific learning disability with 42% identifying as African-American or

Black. Many students identified as EBD and SLD are served in self-contained settings, whether it be self-contained schools or the less restrictive, self-contained classrooms within schools that also provide general education services. A review of literature suggests that self-contained environments are thought to be best for EBD students based on an increase in community support, decrease in distraction and the opportunity for specialized instruction and behavioral management (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati & Cosier, 2011). While many continue to advocate for such settings, some research reports that self-contained settings for EBD students are of little value and fail to provide a beneficial social and academic environment (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati & Cosier, 2011). Participation in settings other than general education has negatively impacted the progress of EBD students, resulting in a lack of behavioral and academic progress (Wiley, Siperstein & Forness, 2011).

One potential challenge in the education and behavior modification of EBD students, is the teachers themselves, which includes the programs that help to prepare them. Teachers of students with EBD are rarely trained as both educators and providers of mental health, which is necessary to aid in the prevention and modification of behaviors in an effort to increase educational access (Teagarden, Zabel & Kuff, 2015). Teachers of EBD students report that they feel as though they lack a number of skills that would make them successful teachers. In one study, novice teachers from three private schools specifically for EBD children completed an open-ended two question survey with the purpose of identifying the skills that the teachers believed that novice ED/BD teachers needed, and to identify the skills that novice ED/BD teachers were lacking (Kindzierski, O'dell, Marable & Raimondi, 2013). Researchers found six

common themes indicating skills needed and skills lacking, (1) best practices, (2) classroom management, (3) preparation, (4) personal disposition, (5) collaboration and (6) experience; the participants reported that educator programs did not appropriately prepare them for the realities of EBD classrooms (Kindzierski, O'dell, Marable & Raimondi, 2013). This sentiment of a lack of proper preparation was supported by Oliver and Reschly (2010) in their review of syllabi of EBD educator programs. They found that only 27% of educator preparation programs reviewed had courses dedicated to classroom management and that the other schools had sporadic information about behavior and classroom management contained in various courses. They also noted that the majority of the focus on classroom management was reactive rather than preventative (Olver & Reschly, 2010).

Cumulatively, these challenges make it increasingly difficult to work with EBD populations; such difficulty is then reflected in the outcomes of EBD students. Studies reviewing the outcome of students identified as EBD is troubling and proves that much work needs to be done in this area of special education (Kauffman, 2014). In one study, a similar set of EBD children across three separate placement types, self-contained school, self-contained classroom and general education, were assessed in behavioral and academic domains over the course of the two years. Despite setting, the children showed almost no academic or social gains (Wiley, Siperstein & Forness, 2011). Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson and Oliver (2011) found that placement within the general education setting had a slight, yet insignificant academic and behavioral advantage over self-contained settings. Their work, which included a review of records, teacher reports and standardized measured, showed that students in self-contained settings exhibited

more externalizing behaviors, such as teasing and other deliberate verbal and physical actions that provoked others (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson & Oliver, 2011). This is consistent with other research that shows that as the restrictiveness increases, so do behavioral concerns which limits the ability of all students to become and remain actively engaged academically (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson & Oliver, 2011). The study also revealed that the teachers did not differ much in instructional strategies or format, but did differ in content in that special education teachers did not offer the same evidence-based content access to students (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson & Oliver, 2011). The teachers in the self-contained classes that were studied typically focused on whole-group instructional methods with some small-group implementation, while empirical research suggests that students in self-contained settings benefit from an increase of small-group support (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson & Oliver, 2011). Although some research concludes that setting and placement type has the ability to impact success, this suggests that regardless of placement, EBD students are underserved in public education. The issue of segregated placement settings is of great concern in the area of SLD; minority children that are deemed socioculturally deprived and identified as having mild learning disabilities are often placed within the most restrictive of placements (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

The generally negative outcome of special education students continues long after placement, as academic and social performance continues to decline steadily as time in restrictive placements continues (Lane, Barton-Arwood, Nelson & Wehby, 2008). Students with EBD continue to experience poor outcomes as adults, including poverty, homelessness, criminalization and institutionalization as they struggle to make

use of effective coping and decision-making skills (Rueter, 2011). Negative long-term impact of disability type occurs for students of varying disability types, but appears to worsen for disabilities that impact students' ability to earn a high school diploma (Zhang & Kaysiyannis, 2002). In addition to the specific issues that create concern for students, the issue of effectiveness of special education and the process of identification impacts all categories of disability.

Black Male Disproportionality in Special Education

Teachers' decisions and the biases that aid in guiding those decisions have a profound impact on the educational placement and future of students (Riley, 2014). For African-American male students, this is particularly true and overwhelmingly negative. Numerous studies have found there to be an overrepresentation of boys, specifically boys of racial minority within special education (Piechura-Couture, Hens & Tichenor, 2011). This disproportionate overrepresentation has been of concern to minority populations for decades, causing ongoing challenges and calls for additional research and educational reform (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Despite concerns, the disproportionality has not changed and has continued to rise among particular high-incidence disability types (Kincaid & Sullivan, 2017). High-incidence disability categories include EBD, SLD, SLI and mild intellectual disabilities (ID), and represent over 80% of the total number of students with disabilities. These disabilities are often comorbid (or can co-exist).

This overrepresentation occurs at the greatest rates in the area of emotional and behavioral disorders, in which some level of subjectivity plays a role in disability identification and subsequent placement (Raines, Dever, Kamphaus & Roach,

2012). Subjectivity in this area allows for a student's education to be determined, to some extent, by the teachers who refer them to special education and whatever bias, implicit or explicit, that a teacher may hold about what is normal (Echevarria, Powers & Elliot, 2004). Overrepresentation is also an issue in the other high-incidence category of SLD. Disproportionate overrepresentation fuels the perception that children are misplaced in special education settings, and do not have actual disabilities (Tomasi & Weinberg, 1999).

Teachers generally view male students as behaviorally difficult and academically limited (Riley, 2014). Such gendered views equate to limited opportunities for academic advancement, greater rates of special education placement and greater policing of classroom behavior (Riley, 2014). These outcomes negatively impact the education of male students as well as their view of themselves (Klienfield, 2009). The increase in behavioral policing has additional implications, as behavioral concerns and related disciplinary measures often mean increased time outside of the classroom and an increase in the number of referrals for special education services, specifically those related to the presentation of externalizing behavioral problems (Nasir, Ross, McKinney de Royston, Given & Bryant, 2013). Despite information establishing perceived differences based on gender, teachers still believe that they present an equitable front in how they interact with, discipline and make decisions for students (Riley, 2014). When left unexamined, implicit biases are likely to lead to limited educational opportunity for specific groups of students.

In addition to being faced with teacher biases based on gender, African-American male students are also presented with racial biases. Beginning in pre-kindergarten,

African-American male students present with increased educational risk, based in part due to their intersectional identities (Rashid, 2009). Such educational limitations and lowered behavioral expectations can result in referral to and treatment for special education services on the basis of perceived academic, emotional and behavioral deficits. African-American males are significantly more likely to be diagnosed or referred for services based on high-incidence behavioral disorders, such as Attentional Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Conduct Disorder, as compared to their white male peers (Clark, 2007).

Boys of color tend to enter school with perceived deficits in the area of language, literacy and emotional and behavioral regulation (Barbarin, 2015). This is coupled with the fact that schools generally employ teachers and materials that are in conflict with the background and lived experiences of minority students (Echevarria, Powers & Elliot, 2004). A disconnect between student culture and the culture of education makes for challenges in educational and behavioral compliance (Echevarria, Powers & Elliot, 2014). Cultural differences in acceptable behaviors are likely to lead to miscommunication or a perception of misbehavior by educators. One such example, play fighting, is generally perceived as acceptable for African-American males within their homes and community, but is immediately perceived as aggression within the school environment (Monroe, 2006). With the education profession being comprised mainly of white females who may inherently have limited knowledge or understanding of the culture of African-American males, implicit biases generally go largely unchallenged over extended periods of time and have the ability to have an expansive impact on educational outcome (Monroe, 2006). The measures taken in an effort to deal with

behavioral noncompliance is also troubling, with Black male students being disciplined at excessive rates even when displaying behaviors identical to their non-minority peers (Monroe, 2006). Without appropriate measures to help prevent and alleviate these behaviors, male minorities tend to continue to fare poorly and even develop additional deficits over time (Barbarin, 2015).

Black Male Experience in Special Education

A review of the literature reveals that there is a dearth of information related to the educational experiences of Black males in special education, regardless of disability or placement type. Ladson-Billings suggests that the lack of inquiry into the educational experiences of Black children is based on the deficit lens by which Black children are viewed (1995). Throughout educational literature, research and inquiry seeks to situate Black children as student failures, with little attention paid to the children's culture or experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is evidenced by the vast amount of research that continues to document racial achievement gaps, higher rates of exclusionary discipline practices, underrepresentation in advanced programs as well and overrepresentation in special education programs (Robinson, 2013).

Banks (2017) was able to capture the K-12 educational experiences of seven African-American males labeled with learning disabilities after they had completed high school. Banks (2017) found a number of themes that arose from her interviews; students in this study all expressed an overwhelming frustration in the classroom, despite their various settings. The frustrations of the students were said to be the result of the stigmatizing labels of disabilities, the understanding of racism as well a continuous

feeling of not having their individual learning needs met, regardless of the modifications and accommodations that were said to have been in place (Banks, 2017).

Another study conducted by Banks (2014) provides further insight into the experiences of Black males identified as having learning disabilities. Banks (2014) was able to identify the emergence of three themes that represented the experiences of these students. She found that students believed that (1) their high school teachers viewed them as deficit, limiting their access to the most appropriate course, (2) they felt as though they had limited knowledge of their disabilities and specific needs and (3) they each felt as though they had competing identities that limited their desire to access necessary accommodations for their disabilities (Banks, 2014). The students also described limited knowledge and preparation for life beyond college, despite special education transition requirements (Banks, 2014).

It is also important to understand the experiences of the families of Black students that are placed within special education settings. According to the IDEA, parents and/or guardians are required to consent to the evaluation process as well to the provision of special education services and specific placement types. Despite a requirement to attend and be a part of the IEP team and process, African American parents and families have consistently had low rates of participation (Angelov & Anderson, 2013). Boyd and Correa (2005) cite a number of reasons that attribute to low rates of participation by Black families, including parental biases toward professionals, a lack of knowledge and comfort with schooling and special education and general differences in socioeconomic and cultural values that impact how disabilities are perceived and treated. Angelov and Anderson (2013) provide a narrative that provides context for the power differential and

that many reasons that researchers have found to contribute to lower rates of IEP participation among African-American families. In this narrative, the researchers describe a meeting in which the special education provider ignored parent requests for help and further clarification, openly called the mother a "bad parent" and had the student removed from the meeting by police for wearing a hat (Angelov & Anderson, 2013).

Rogers (2002) also references the difficulty that parents of African-American children have at IEP meeting. In her research she found there to be major contradictions in the meetings themselves, as well as in the two meetings to which she was involved, an initial placement meeting and an annual review. In the initial placement meeting, the structure of the meeting allowed for the parent to speak very little and only after the professionals made a case for the educational and behavioral deficits of her child (Rogers, 2002). Rogers (2002) noted that in the second meeting, the annual IEP review, that the parent was able to speak more but that sound data was not present at the meeting and that the parent often asked for clarification that she did not receive as the special educators and guidance counselor spoke about placement type using varied words that were not defined and did not match the parent's understanding of special education.

For many African-American families, socio-cultural factors may also influence their participation and comfort in the special education processes (Boyd & Correa, 2005). Religion and the role of the extended family have historically played and continue to play a large role in the daily functioning and coping mechanism of African-American families. This can easily be applied to the additional stressor of having one's child be diagnosed with a disability and recommended for specialized educational services (Boyd & Correa, 2005). African-American families of students with disabilities often seek

support and guidance from their church or family, as opposed to the formalized support offered by schools (Boyd & Correa, 2005). Additionally, African-American families of school aged children often cite negative personal experiences in school and a keen understanding of the power differential that exists between parents and professional educators (Angelov & Anderson, 2013). As suggested by Rogers' (2002) experience, parents can have negative connections to the very school in which they are expected to advocate for their own children in. Further evidence provided by Angelov and Anderson (2013) suggests that many parents believe that their input at IEP meetings is supplemental and not important to the process. The formalized and legal aspects of the IEP process, which parents often have little to no training in, creates a situation or the perception of a situation, in which special educators yield more power over educational success than the parents themselves (Boyd & Correa, 2005). This lack of true decision-making participation by parents can have very severe consequences for students and their educational outcomes (Rogers, 2002).

The biases and distrust of parents and family members is not unidirectional. Professionals also develop biases towards parents of Black students that have been evaluated for special education services (Boyd & Correa, 2005). Educational professionals often view the parents and families of students with disabilities as apathetic toward education and/or unable to help their children succeed based on their own limitations, whether they be educational background or more logistical reasons such as those related to finances or transportation (Angelov & Anderson, 2013). Limited parental knowledge related to educational jargon and subsequent lack of input also places parents

at increased risk for becoming identified and treated as an uninfluential party to the IEP process (Boyd & Correa, 2005).

Theoretical Perspective

This action research is guided by the theoretical perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT, as a framework, was initially developed in the 1970s by legal scholars of color who felt as though Critical Legal Studies (CLS) did little to center race in the examination of legal inequities (Capper, 2015). In the field of legal studies, CRT attempts to critically understand the ways in which racism is normalized and reproduced, socially and legally (Capper, 2015). CRT was introduced to the field of education in 1994, and has since been used as a guiding theory and analytical tool to analyze and critique education, in practice and in research (Ladson-Billing, 2005). Solorzano and Yasso (2002) further suggest that CRT can be used to transform the various aspects of education that work to maintain the current discourses and status quo.

Critiquing education, and more specifically special education, through the lens of CRT allows us to assert that "since school systems are a mere reflection of society, they too engage in practices that privilege the dominant" (McCarther & Davis, 2017, p. 106). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) CRT is based on the following tenets,

1. A belief that racism is normal
2. Interest convergence
3. Race as a social construct
4. Intersectionality
5. Voice/counter-narrative.

These tenets work together to produce a theory and methodology that analyses education, and other disciplines, in a manner that centers the issue of race.

Tenet 1: Racism is Endemic

Many people define racism by individual and intentional acts, but CRT views racism on the contrary (Capper, 2015). According to Milner (2008), "racism is present but not even recognizable because it becomes naturalized and normalized" (p. 337). CRT centers racism to aid in the understanding of the grand impact that racism has had and continues to have in the structural, political and economic functioning of the United States (Capper, 2015). For Critical Race scholars, racism represents a power deferential that oppresses minorities while continuously empowering its creators, whites (Jay, 2003). Jay (2003) further supports the endemic nature of racism as she describes the fact that individuals inside and outside of the United States equate the word 'American' to 'white', despite the diverse racial and cultural makeup of the nation.

The idea that racism is both permanent and endemic can help to understand the continuance of poor outcomes for minorities as well as the overrepresentation of minorities, specifically Black males in special education programs. Poor minority students are the most likely to be tracked into lower levels of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Even when studies are controlled for all other factors, including class and gender, race continues to determine outcome (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Districts and the schools that they govern perpetuate racism through the culture, policies and practices that they employ (Capper, 2018).

Tenet 2: Interest Convergence

Interest convergence "stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of Whites" (Milner, 2008). This tenet of CRT views racism and the quest for equitable outcomes from the perspective of a loss versus gain binary, in which society places a higher value on the outcome when whites have something to gain (Bell, 1995). Bell (1995) discusses the idea of interest convergence in his analysis of the historically significant Brown v Board of Education (1954) case. This landmark case declared that separate schooling was inherently unequal and unconstitutional. This case in which legal proceedings began in 1951, garnered support from African-Americans following the unsuccessfully ongoing legal struggle requesting the equalization of separate facilities which lasted for over fifteen years (Bell, 1992). According to Bell (1992) equalization requests were denied because they lacked value to whites. In 1954, interests converged and appeared in the form of international and domestic pressures to abandon segregation, thus resulting in the Brown decision (Bell, 1995). Domestically, the southern states sought an end to segregation as they felt the economic pressure to industrialize, while international pressures intensified as the nation sought to repair its image which had been tainted by communist nations during the Cold War, (Bell, 1995). Bell (1995) further evidences his idea of interest convergence in this case by citing the lack of enforcement of the Brown decision. The decision produced the symbolic idea of equality necessary for White interests, but refused to outline a means or timeline for compliance as requested by Black interests.

Milner (2008) asserts that divergent interests, which are present at four levels in education, continue to threaten an equitable outcome for minority students. These divergent interests begin in teacher educator programs and continue impact into the classrooms of educators. As previously discussed, the demographic makeup of professional educators consists primarily of white females, which is in contrast to the demographic makeup of the increasingly diverse student populations of public schools. Despite increase in student diversity and ever widening achievement gaps, teacher educator programs continue to align with the culture and interests of White female teachers (Milner, 2008). These programs have decidedly taken on an additive approach to education in which multicultural themes, concepts and courses have been added as supplements or electives to teacher educator programs (Milner, 2008). Milner (2008) cites this phenomenon as being the result of a lack of interest convergence. Teacher educator programs and the teachers that they produce have yet to find value in programs that truly embrace multiculturalism and prepare teachers to effectively teach in diverse schools and classrooms.

Tenet 3: Race as a Social Construct

Race is difficult to define, as well as constantly changing (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). This difficulty in defining race can be attributed to the idea that race exists as a social construct and is based in the various ways that human beings choose to group themselves and one another. In keeping with CRT, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) warn that thinking of race in the strict terms of a theoretical and ideological concept seemingly denies the reality of the racialized society we exist in and the impact that it has in the daily lives of racial minorities. African-Americans continue to display significant

long-term effects related to race and their need to create a cohesive cultural identity (Berry & Candis, 2013). As it relates to the social construction of race, the goal of CRT is to acknowledge that race is socially constructed but that race has a very profound impact that privileges whiteness and thus needs to be deconstructed (Berry & Candis, 2013).

Tenet 4: Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as a term and concept, is used to describe the interaction and influence of multiple identities on individuals' experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). This concept was initially introduced and used by Crenshaw (1991) to analyze the existence and treatment of Black women, specifically in sexual violence cases, whose needs and issues were not accounted for within other civil rights and social change movements. According to Crenshaw (1991), identity-based politics act as sources of strength that are able to propel change, but are limited in that it pays little attention to the differences that exist among group members, further contributing to tension within and among groups. As a concept and analytical tools, intersectionality has been adapted beyond its original Black feminist use, to include other disciplines and various intersections of identities. Although there exists a dearth of information regarding the intersection of Black and male identities in education, Crenshaw (1991) notes that racism "denies men of color the power and privilege that dominant men enjoy" (p. 1258).

Tenet 5: Voice/Counternarrative

Counternarrative, as a central tenet of CRT, helps us to begin to value the perspective of others that are often marginalized (Dixson & Anderson, 2018). Stories that tell of the lived experiences of othered individuals and groups help scholars to better

understand varying perspectives and the ways in which race influences experiences, such as students' experiences in education. Additionally, counternarratives work to trouble the commonly held narratives that only represent the dominant group (Berry & Candis, 2013). Studies of Black male student's experiences and attitudes related to school reveal race and culture to be a significant and salient facet in perception and outcome (Banks, 2014). Using stories to challenge dominant narratives provides a form of education that may be effective in understanding and providing a structure of education that works for Black students (Dixson & Anderson, 2018).

In addition to the existing foundational tenets of CRT, the application of CRT has also called for additional constructs that are used to analyze the impact of race and racism. These additional constructs include the ideas of whiteness as property, racial realism, expansive notions of equality and a critique of colorblindness. The idea of 'whiteness as property' has commonly been applied to the discipline of educational research and analysis. According to the Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), the idea of property can apply to education explicitly and implicitly. Because schools are often, to some extent, funded by local property taxes one can see how property serves to support the limiting of effective schooling for some. Schools that are located in areas that include better property are often deemed better schools, based on the families that they serve and also the resources that are made available to those students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Another issue that arises out of the idea of whiteness of property deals with school curriculum, both formalized and hidden. The hidden curriculum, acts as the socialization factor, that values and stratifies the dominant discourse over all other (Jay, 2003). Jay (2003) asserts that this hidden curriculum that is employed by schools, serves

to reproduce the status quo through hegemony. This valuing of some norms over others plays out in the behavioral and emotional expression of minorities which often lead to disciplinary action and special education referrals. Students are explicitly taught that conformity to traditionally white norms and value systems are necessary for success (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Conclusion

This review of literature supports the need for increased research related to Black male children with high-incidence disability types and disproportionately overrepresented in self-contained special education classrooms. Without further research, Black male children with disabilities will continue to fare poorly, academically and socially, while in school and well into their adulthood. In addition to supporting the need for such research, this review was also intended to provide a synthesis of the information, although limited, related to the topic at hand. This information will be used to develop the specific tools, methodology as well as support the noted theoretical foundation.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to address the specific ways in which the research will be carried out. This research will use qualitative research methods to explore educational and placement experiences related to the ongoing phenomenon of disproportionate representation of Black males in restrictive special education settings, from their perspectives. This chapter will provide further discussion of the justification of qualitative research. An overview of the participants and research site will also be included to help orient the readers to the population that is being studied.

Research Site

This study will take place at Berry High School (pseudonym), a high school located in a suburban school district located within the major metropolitan area of Columbia, South Carolina. Berry High School currently has an enrollment of 1,352 students. Ethnic and racial minorities make up a majority of the enrollment with 52% of the population identifying as Black/African-American, an additional 4% identifying as Hispanic and 36% of the population identifying as white. American Indians, Asians and those identifying as two or more races make up fewer than 10% of the population combined. 48% of the population is comprised of female students and the other 52% male. 59% of the student population can be classified as being economically

disadvantaged based on the receipt of Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits or free and reduced lunch. Academically, the student population tends to score below the average of other high schools located within the district, but slightly better than other schools within the state, as evidenced by subject proficiency, or end of course exams. According to the ACT, a college readiness exam given to high school juniors across the state of South Carolina, Berry High School scored below district average but slightly above state averages in all tested subject areas (reading, writing, English, math and science). School averages were recorded as 17.9 in the 2017-2018 school year, while district scores were at 19.9 and the state average was 17.7. ACT scores range from a low of 0 to a high of 36. Scores on a writing assessment and WorkKeys, a job skills readiness assessment, among the student population follow similar score patterns.

36% of the student population has been identified as having a disability that impacts learning and requires provision of special education services within the school environment. 6% of the student population receives special education services in one of two self-contained programs, with placement based on disability type and severity. This action research will take place in a self-contained multi-categorical English classroom. Students in this setting represent students of varying disability types, although all of the participants have been identified as having at least one high-incidence disability type of either an emotional/behavioral disorder and/or a specific learning disabilities.

Participant Researcher

As participant-researcher of this study, my primary role in this research will be to engage in dialogue with the student-participants in an effort to record their experiences in special education, specifically with regards to their initiation and placement in self-contained classrooms and resulting experiences with attention given to racial perceptions and implications. It is important to note that I am involved with the student-participants on an ongoing basis as I am a special education teacher serving this group of students in a self-contained multi-categorical classroom. In accordance with other self-contained classroom models, I am responsible for teaching multiple academic subjects, which are currently assigned as English and social studies, with an additional emphasis on affective education to aid students in the development of appropriate emotional and behavioral expression. Teaching multiple subject areas allows contact with the student-participants across multiple class periods each day.

It may also be important to understand my positionality as participant-researcher. My positionality as a Black female deeply interested in race and equity issues impacts every aspect of this research, from its conceptualization to the analysis. It is impossible to separate myself from the work and the meaning that I will be able to make of the gathered data. I see myself, my family members, my husband and my own children in the lives of the children that I serve, including those that are to participate in this research study. The trajectories of the lives of those that I serve on a daily basis align with that of my own life as I struggled to validate my existence and give voice and power to my experiences.

Prior to becoming a professional educator, I served at-risk children in a number of roles, to include a social worker, school counselor and behavior interventionist. Despite the position, I have always worked with mostly Black male youth, despite working in very diverse metropolitan areas. Keeping my personal and professional experiences in mind, it has been difficult to see anything other than trauma in the lives of the Black males that I have served and continue to serve as a special education teacher. My experiences and positionality have led me to consistently question placement and services that are in place to support students, specifically Black male students.

Student-Participants

Convenience sampling will be used to identify the group of student-participants, as the sample of students represents an entire class period of my current teaching roster. The proposal for this research study was submitted to the principal of Berry High School prior to data collection for a review of the purpose, methods and to gain approval. Following site-leadership approval, approval was also granted from the school district's Department of Accountability which ensures that proposed classroom research is safe and appropriate.

Prior to data collection, parents will be informed of the research study, verbally and in writing, and will be given the opportunity to withdraw consent. The participants in this research study will be students within a multi-categorical self-contained special education class for students with various diagnosed disorders and disabilities. The course in which the research will take place addresses the educational needs of seven students. Based on the sensitive personal and legal information related to students with disabilities, the name of the school will be changed to Berry High School with the name

of its employing district withheld for the purpose of research. Student names will also be replaced with pseudonyms. A summary of general information regarding participants is contained in Table 3.1.

All of the students within the classroom are males that identify as being Black or African-American. In line with community economic conditions, students can be identified as economically disadvantaged, receiving Medicaid services as well as free breakfast and lunch services. There is also a strong similarity in the familial backgrounds of each student, including high incidents of unemployment, criminal backgrounds and low rates of high school graduation among parents.

Table 3.1: Participant Disability Summary

Name	Grade	Primary Disability	Secondary Disability	School Outcome	
				Certificate of Attendance	District Occupational Certificate
Damarco*	10	SLD	SLI	X	
Derek	10	SLD	SLI	X	
Freddie	10	ED			X
Jaylin*	10	ED	SLD	X	
Ricky*	11	ED	SLD		X
Shad	12	ED		X	
Teyvon*	10	ED			X

While the students are able to participate in some grade level activities, as deemed appropriate by administrators and other service providers, the student-participants will only be entitled to a certificate of completion at the end of their high school career, which

may extend up until age 21, as deemed appropriate by the IEP team. All of the students in the classroom have been placed on a district certificate of attendance or a district occupational credential track, meaning their education will not culminate in a standard high school diploma. Although students are high-school aged, student-participants function at around a fifth grade reading & writing level, as determined by standardized tests and progress monitoring data. While the focus group will take place within the classroom setting with all seven students, a selected number of students of this group will participate additionally in separate semi-structured individual interviews; these students are noted in Table 3.1 with an asterisk (*).

Research Design

In the field of education, traditional research and action research are two methods that are able to achieve increased understanding and overall effectiveness. Traditional educational research generally follows the scientific method, or some form of it, and wishes to explain, understand and/or improve upon observed educational phenomena. In this type of research, researchers are often removed from the environments in which they seek to understand and are not privy to daily processes or long-term outcomes (Mertler, 2013). In addition to understanding and improving the field, traditional research often has a goal of generalizing to larger populations (Stringer, 2014). Many educators look to traditional educational research to help solve problems and increase effectiveness but find that research cannot be easily applied to their specific situations and environments; action research is a type of research that can address this concern.

According to Stringer (2014), action research can be defined as "a systemic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they

confront in their everyday lives" (p.1). A similar definition is provided by Mertler (2013), as he applies action research to the field of education and states that action research is done "by teachers for themselves," in an effort to improve personal effectiveness. Action research differs from traditional research methods in that it does not seek to generalize to larger populations, although it has been known to influence inquiry based research (Stringer, 2014). This method of research does not follow the scientific method, rather it makes use of various cyclical models that require the researcher to continuously plan, act and reflect (Mertler, 2013). Reflection is vital to the action research process, as it involves critically thinking about one's actions and decisions. Researchers must be able to be actively involved in the process to collect and analyze data and to think through the decision-making processes.

Traditionally, action research makes use of an identified intervention to solve a problem of practice for educators (Mertler, 2013). This study will not seek to solve a problem as great as the overrepresentation of Black males diagnosed with high-incidence disability types and placed in self-contained settings, rather it will seek to understand the phenomenon in my setting. This type of action research called practitioner inquiry, allows for participant-researchers to understand and reflect on their own practice as educators to create necessary changes that work to interrupt the problem of practice. The cycle of inquiry includes stages of questioning, data collection and data analysis (Dana, 2013).

Inquiry based action research was employed in an effort to understand an issue of concern in the current working environment of the participant-researcher. While traditional methods have the ability to impact a greater part of the field of education, it is

important that educators are able to assess their personal work environments and make improvements as deemed appropriate. This is especially important in a field such as special education because of the varied nature of the classrooms and individual needs. Any one-size-fits-all approach to research and intervention is likely to be of disservice to students and may also deviate from the individualized programs that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates. Specialized instruction requires the use of specialized research methods to increase effectiveness and solve problems present in daily practice.

Methodology

In an effort to maintain committed to both the theoretical tenets of CRT, as well as the goals of action research, qualitative research will be employed. Counter-storytelling, as a tenet of CRT, calls for the storytelling of those that are generally not heard from and are generally relegated to becoming subjects of the conditions that are being explored (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The goal of counter-storytelling is to assist in the deconstruction of narratives that dominate discourse and marginalize the narratives of other groups; an alternative goal is to liberate those that are often unheard (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The overall goal of the interview and construction of counter-narratives is to "elicit memories, attitudes, and reflections on experiences: (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 34).

In the telling and recording of educational placement history, life history inquiry is also called upon. Life history inquiry allows researcher to gain insight into the human condition through the exploration of another person's experiences, specifically those experiences that they use to help justify their conditions and interactions with the world

(Cole and Knowles, 2001). People develop stories that work together to create their life story (Linde, 1993). These stories, which are adapted, embellished or even forgotten over time work together to create a life history that helps people make sense of themselves and their lives Linde, 1993). Making use of inquiry based qualitative research, it is my plan to understand the life history of each of the participants as I work to create counter-narratives and understand their personal experiences with special education. Qualitative research, in the form of focus groups and interviews is also important in action research as it has the ability to directly and immediately inform the participant-researcher allowing for modifications in an effort to increase overall effectiveness.

Procedure

As the participant-researcher, I will conduct a review of the educational records of the student-participants. This process will collect specific information regarding disability type, academic information, behavioral trends as well as specific special education placement information. Observations will also be conducted as a means to develop brief anecdotal descriptions of student-participant's personality and observable academic/behavioral functioning.

A whole-class focus group will be conducted, making use of general questions regarding the student-participants' placement in a self-contained classroom and the overall impact that placement had on their educational experiences. The focus group will be conducted in the same space and time as normal class and in a discussion format that is generally used in the classroom setting with student-participants and teacher-participant seated at the same table. Student-participants will be provided with pizza and

water for their participation. Students will also be verbally asked for their consent to participate and to be recorded during the discussion. Students that do not consent will still be able to partake in the meal. The focus group will last for approximately 45 minutes. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university deemed this research study exempt; no written consent by students and/or parents is necessary for the purposes of this research (Appendix D).

Individual interviews will take place the week following the focus group. The informal semi-structured interviews between participant-researcher and the student-participants will take place in person and within the same classroom space. Following the focus group, students will be asked if they wish to participate in individual follow-up interviews. Students that respond affirmatively will be interviewed individually. These students will not be offered any additional incentive for participation and will be interviewed individually in the classroom space during a 30-minute non-academic time period that is generally used for student enrichment.

The focus group and individual interviews will be audio-recorded to assist in transcription and response coding during the data analysis stage. In addition to the recording of the interview, during the interview I will also record handwritten notes; handwritten notes are aimed at describing non-verbal and paraverbal cues and will provide the basis for effective follow-up questions. Interview questions (APPENDIX B) will provide structure to the interview, but will not be the only questions that are to be asked; probative questions are permitted to clarify the meaning of the student-participant and to ensure that responses adequately address the intended questions.

Data Analysis

Following the focus group and interview processes, the recorded data will be transcribed verbatim. The transcription process will be completed manually and responses will be organized in a question-by-question format. Organizing responses in this manner allows for increased ability to make valid connections among and between student responses. Because the interview will be semi-structured and create additional probative questions, the responses to follow-up questions will be included in the transcription for the original question. The transcribed data will be reviewed with student-participants for clarity, if the need arises.

Transcribed interview and focus group responses will be paired with field notes and coded to identify themes and map relationships among the data. The responses from individual student-participants will be used to form personal counternarratives for each student regarding the reasons that they believe that they were placed in self-contained settings. Themes are likely to emerge as a result of use of specific repeated words, but also by garnering meaning or intention of the student-participants. The identification of themes and topics will be applied to the initial research question and analyzed through the lens of CRT.

Conclusion

The chapter outlined the methods to be used in the implementation of this inquiry based action research process. The methods chosen by myself were chosen in an effort to best understand the proposed research question, asking what are the educational and placement experiences of Black male students impacted by disproportionate over-

representation in self-contained special education classrooms. The methods are justified and based on the research types, as well as the theoretical perspectives used to guide the research. The included overview related to the student-participants and the setting was provided to assist readers in understanding the context in which the research took place. This is also useful for the purposes of future research suggestions and implementations.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter will begin with brief biographical data related to each student-participant and continue onto a discussion of the themes that I found to be recurring and evident in the focus group. Themes of stigmatization, discomfort and apathy became evident to me during the focus group, and were solidified through the transcription and coding process. Student quotes are throughout the discussion of thematic understanding to better support, develop and reinforce the connections that I found to be valuable and pertinent to the research question of what are the educational and placement experiences of Black male students impacted by disproportionate over-representation in self-contained special education classrooms.

Following the thematic discussion of the focus group, this chapter will go on to explore the individual counter-narratives produced as a result of the individual interviews with student-participants. The information contained in the narrative provides an integration of the students' voices and the meaning making process as explored by myself and the students during the interviews. The chapter concludes with findings related to the understanding of the disproportionate overrepresentation of Black males, as analyzed through the lens of CRT and supported by the voices and narratives of participants.

Student-Participant Biographies

Damarco

Damarco is a tenth grade student who was placed in the self-contained setting at the age of ten. Damarco can be described as a generally goofy student who is most often quiet and kind to others. Damarco does display some emotional and behavioral regulation issues when he feels as though he is tested by others, which has resulted in at least two physical altercations during the current school year. Academically, Damarco chooses to exert little to no effort in the classroom, but would rather perform assistive tasks for the teacher or listen to and compose music on his cellular phone. Damarco frequently refuses to complete academic tasks and at times shuts down completely, refusing to express wants and needs.

Jaylin

Jaylin is a tenth grade student who began receiving special services for a speech impairment at age five but was later found to be eligible for special services for an emotional disability at age seven and placed in the self-contained setting. Jaylin is an outgoing student who is very popular and displays social influence throughout the school environment. Jaylin is on a modified school schedule due to his inability to consistently meet school-wide behavioral expectations; Instead of attending four classes, he attends school for the final two learning blocks of each school day. Jaylin skips classes often and prefers to tend to the social aspects of schooling. Jaylin has fared poorly in classes and does not complete classwork or assessments in any classes. Jaylin has established a trusting relationship with several adults around campus, but continues to receive discipline referrals nearly daily for behavioral infractions. Jaylin angers easily and often

engages in risk behaviors, including theft and fighting, which have resulted in three of his discipline referrals for the school year.

Ricky

Ricky is an 11th grade student who has been placed in self-contained settings for eight years, since the age of nine. Ricky can be described as a verbally and emotionally explosive student, who often calls out other students for bullying despite partaking in the same behaviors toward others, including teachers and staff. Ricky shows an overall commitment to completing academic tasks, but has shown little growth in content areas. He often rushes through assignments and does not respond well to specialized individualized instruction or redirection. Ricky displays diminished stamina in the academic setting, especially after regaining emotional control following a verbal tirade.

Teyvon

Teyvon is a tenth grader who has intermittently been placed in self-contained programs beginning in grade four. Teyvon is a bright student that has gone back and forth between placements in the general education setting and self-contained classes at the competing requests of he and his mother. Teyvon has not been very successful in the general education setting, based on low levels of emotional and behavioral functioning. Teyvon has been described by many teachers as refusing to complete work and participate in group assignments and class discussions. He also has a history of provoking altercations, both physically and verbally, and then denying responsibility and removing himself from the environment without permission. Teyvon does not readily express his anxiety and emotions and tends to perform better in smaller settings.

Themes

Stigmatization

All of the focus group participants, in their own words, spoke to the stigmatization that has resulted from being placed in a self-contained special education setting. They believe that being in their current setting has the capacity to make them appear less educable to other students and teachers within the general education setting. Jaylin jumps up at one point in the discussion and exclaims,

> "This is the slow class! Everybody know that classes with two teachers are the slow classes!"

Overall, the group agrees with Jaylin as Shad and Derek followed the comment with chuckles and additional statements of support such as "hell yeah". As a follow up question, the group was asked if being identified as "slow" was bothersome. Most of the student-participants responded affirmatively, but Freddie chimed in stating,

> "I used to think that's what these classes was all about but I was talking to [Alex] earlier this year, and he was like all classes learn the same stuff.' I believe that. It's just the teachers that teach it different. In here, it's like more slower so we can understand it better and out there it's all fast and stuff. It's just different."

Derek agreed that the instructional speed was slower but that it was preferred to what he has experienced in his general education classrooms.

The continuation of the discussion reveals that the students do not believe that they are slow, and comparatively evaluate their classroom and individual functional skills against the other self-contained classroom on campus. The campus hosts two self-contained programs, with the other being geared toward students with intellectual

disabilities and severe autism symptoms/challenges. Jaylin referenced his older brother John who is placed in the intellectually disabled self-contained classroom, stating,

> "Now John class, that's the slow class foreal. I ain't slow like him. Really, he ain't even that slow, he don't act like that at home."

Comparatively, the student-participants do not behave as traditionally thought of for a self-contained setting and are able to maintain socially acceptable peer relationships and communicate as well as accommodate for their individual needs.

Ricky states,

> "I can do the same things that other students do, but I'm in here instead."

The students believe that the stigma attached to their disabilities are reflected in their peer groups as well as with their teachers. Shad agrees with the statement of another student and reinforces this idea.

> "Sometimes the teachers look at you and start talking all slow like you don't know what the hell they saying. I'm not retarded!"

This stigma among peers and school personnel can be cyclical and further impede the learning potential of students with disabilities. Student-participants relay the idea that they are socially adept and are able to understand when people think less of them. Ricky leads into the idea of internalization of stigma as he reports,

> "Yeah, when they start to treat you differently it makes you wonder about yourself. Sometimes I feel slow. Most of the time I don't but sometimes I do."

Racial (Dis)comfort

For many of the students, race was noted and created an overall discomfort with the overall educational setting. Students expressed disappointment with white teachers and students that, as Damarco stated,

> "Just don't understand us."

For the student-participants, they believed that some of the factors that led them to special education were racially motivated; an emphasis was placed on dress code and other disciplinary issues such as cursing and their reactions to interactions with adults that students deemed disrespectful. Damarco and Jaylin, in particular, felt as though they got into trouble for doing and liking things that are typically ascribed to Black culture. Jaylin said,

> "There's this girl that used to sit in the hallway and play her guitar and sing so loud I could hear her across the whole school, but when I wanna rap out loud, here they go with the write-ups. I don't even care about no write ups no mo."

The students also made note of the fact that their classes within the self-contained setting were comprised mainly of other Black students. Teyvon stated,

> "Everyone in here is Black. It's a little weird because it's not like that in my other classes."

in reference to a recent schedule change that shifted his course load from general education classes to the self-contained classroom setting.

The students went on to express that the special education setting felt more comfortable because all of the other students were also Black and that myself and my instructional assistant were also Black. Freddie described this as "not having to pretend

or smile in they face." Ricky was the only student that expressed indifference to the racial makeup of the classroom, shrugging and stating

"Race doesn't matter; I get along with all people. Black people, white people, Hispanics, the gays, everybody."

Apathy

The words "I don't care" were repeated constantly throughout the focus group, despite student-participant's stories that generally seemed to relay that they did care about their education. Most of the feelings held by students can be described as anger and hate toward their current placement in the self-contained setting. Ricky yelled,

"People just think I'm dumb, like I can't handle myself or something. That's why I hate being in here!"

What initially may be described as apathy may be the result of feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, as many of the participants expressed overwhelming feelings related to the impossibility of escaping special education of the thoughts of others that rendered them incapable. Jaylin referred to his constant request to be placed in the general education setting and reported,

"I don't do no work and I won't. Not until y'all get me out of these classes."

With the exception of one, all of the other student-participants were able to identify a person other than themselves as being the cause of their self-contained placement. Dereck added,

"It was my case manager. It's always the case manager."

When probed further, students expressed that they felt their families also held little power in the decision-making process. The students felt as though the power was beyond the reach of their voice and the voices of their parents. Freddie stated,

> "My mom even tried to get me out of these classes when she realized that I wasn't gon get a diploma, but they just told her 'no'."

Ricky said that his mother also made failed attempts to remove him from the special education setting after he was accepted to the district's magnet only school and later rejected due to his IEP stating that he needed to be served in a self-contained setting that they could not accommodate.

Individual Counter-narratives

Damarco

Damarco was full of energy throughout the interview process, as he moved about the classroom space freely, drawing on the white board and doodling on sheets of paper between responding to questions. Damarco was open about feelings of being placed in the self-contained setting. For Damarco, he believed that his placement was the result of negative relationships and interaction between his teachers and him.

> "You see, these teachers don't like me and they always think that I don't be listening but I do listen."

Damarco describes a difference in his learning style that he believes gives the impression that he doesn't care about his education, when he does. He says,

> "Sometimes I just have my headphones on and they don't like that. I don't be having no music on. I still be listening to the teachers and hearing what they got to say."

Damarco believes that the perception of his apathy as well as the aggression that he shows at times has led to his continued placement in the self-contained special education setting. Despite not agreeing fully with the decision, Damarco has begun to find value in the self-contained setting.

> "I like being in here cause I can't be around white people all the time. I don't like them like that"

Damarco laughed as he stated this, but later expressed comfort being in a classroom in which his peers, and sometimes teachers that looked like him and better understood him.

> "My Black teachers, like you, they don't trip like them other teachers."

Damarco expressed that this statement was a reflection of his interaction with teachers in which he was deemed a behavioral problem for the performance of cultural norm. Damarco cites times in which he has gotten in trouble for violations such as sagging his pants, listening to rap music out loud and cursing. For him, these are not things that should be punishable, despite being against school rules.

Damarco says that he basically lives alone, as he no longer lives with his mother and his father is a long-distance truck driver that is often off working, sometimes for weeks at a time. Damarco was asked about how his parents felt about his behavior infractions and responded,

> "Man, they don't never call my dad and my mom, she answers and she be like 'okay' to get them off the phone but she don't never say nothing to me about it."

Damarco reports that his parents are no longer actively involved in his education and the IEP process that maintains his disability status and placement within the self-contained

special education setting. He believes that his mother understands what is going on in meetings but is not interested as he states,

> "I think she just tired of getting calls and going to meetings. She don't care about none of that."

Jaylin

Such as is the case with Damarco, Jaylin believes that his behavior is the reason that he was placed in and remains in self-contained special education courses. In response to the question of "How did you get here," Jaylin stated,

> "My momma. When I was little, my momma used to tell me to do bad things. I first started getting into trouble when she told me to curse this teach out and punch him. I did it. And a lot of other bad stuff. That's why I'm not even with my momma no more."

Jaylin was removed from his mother's care and placed in foster care three years prior. He remained in foster care for only a short time before a distant relative with similarly aged kids took on guardianship. Although Jaylin has now had a consistent parental figure in his life for a few years, many other aspects of his daily life are challenging including his housing situation, which changes often and currently includes at least 13 other children in a single three-bedroom home.

According to Jaylin's interview, he has experienced ongoing trauma since the passing of his father at age five, including legal issues, poverty, familial drug addiction and being witness the death of an undisclosed family member.

> "Everything was good before my daddy got killed. I know you not gon believe this but, I was a good student. He used to read to me all the time. After he got

killed, I hated reading so much. I still do. You know, my momma used to blame me for my daddy getting shot."

Jaylin recognizes that he has not consistently made use of school appropriate coping strategies, among peers and school personnel, but believes that his is doing the best that he can. He shrugged his shoulders as he said,

"I don't know, I just like to fight. I'm good at it. I might be a famous boxer or something one day."

Jaylin also expressed his dissatisfaction with his placement in special education and school in general.

"I am not supposed to be in these slow classes! I'm not slow! I be the smartest one in here, but nobody don't see that or ever give me a chance."

"I be skipping classes because I know I don't belong in here."

Jaylin believes that his continued placement in the self-contained environment is the result of his behaviors, as well as the decisions of other stakeholders that do not respect him or listen to him. Jaylin reports feeling out of place in the meetings and states,

"I don't like to go to those meetings. All those people talking about you bad and not even trying to listen. I told them that I need to be in all regular classes, but it don't matter. They always do whatever they want."

Jaylin states that his guardian is an active participant in his meetings but only further contributes to his academic failures. He goes on to describe a lack of emotional connection to his guardian and how he believes that she views him as the "demon child," especially when compared to her same-aged biological child. Jaylin says,

"She don't get it either. Sometimes I feel like she don't even want me in the house. I'm gon runaway again."

Ricky

Ricky is the eldest of the participants, and states that he struggles with being placed in the self-contained setting. Ricky goes on to reveal that he has asked his case manager and other special education teachers to place him in the general education setting, but that his requests are always denied. Ricky nearly yells,

"My teachers don't believe in me and my mom and dad don't believe that I can do it either!"

For Ricky, his placement is especially bothersome because he feels as though he is perceived as slow by his peers based on his placement. Ricky also expresses discontent in his placement based on the limited social relationships that he has been able to build within the setting despite the program having maintained the same core of students over the years.

"I don't like the kids in here. They always bully me, so I want to take classes with my friends."

Ricky acknowledges that he has benefited from the special education setting, based on the fact that he has a learning disability and "gets mad." Ricky recalls when he was first diagnosed with a learning disability by a doctor. He describes his disability as the inability to learn at the rate of others and says,

"I struggle with learning and I think that these classes have helped. I just think it's time for me to go to regular classes."

Ricky lives at home, in a two-parent home with his little sister. He states that his school and home life are similar in his interactions with adults.

> "My parents, they're just like the teachers, always breathing down my throat about my attitude and everything."

Teyvon

Of all of the student-participants, Teyvon was the most reserved, which is indicative of his overall behavior in the school setting. For Teyvon, he is the only participant that took on responsibility for his placement in the self-contained setting. When asked "How did you get here," he responded with a simple answer:

> "Me."

When probed further, Teyvon explained that he was not doing what he needed to do to be successful in the general education setting. Teyvon was recently placed back into the self-contained setting based on academic failure in all of his classes, as well as what he describes a lack of action. For the majority of the school year, Teyvon was placed on a diploma track and placed in the general education setting, which was supplemented with two special education resource classes. Teyvon describes his response to his fairly new, although familiar, special education setting by stating the following.

> "I'm in here because I wasn't doing nothing. That's it."

Teyvon is not able or is not willing to express in greater detail about reasons or events that led up to his placement back into the self-contained special education setting. He responded to questions regarding his interest and understanding of the proceedings of IEP meetings by stating,

"I don't like going to meetings because it's weird for everyone to be talking about you."

He goes on to state that his mother often attends his meetings and that,

"She doesn't like the meetings neither and sometimes she doesn't like what they're saying but she goes and just doesn't say much."

Teyvon is an only child and lives in the home with his mother and father; although he lives with both parents, Teyvon states that his father does not get involved with his education anymore, including for IEP meetings. Teyvon was also asked about how his mother reacts to his behavioral infractions.

"You mean my hood? She don't care...I don't get in trouble for that."

Teyvon's reference to his hood describes a dress code violation that Teyvon is constantly in violation of, as he chooses to wear the hood of his sweater on his head and refuses to remove the hood for anyone or any reason. Beyond the description of issues with his hood, Teyvon can be described as a mild mannered student. Throughout the interview process, Teyvon remained still and maintained an even tone and short responses in his expression. Unlike other student-participants, Teyvon believes that he is supposed to be in the special education setting.

"What you mean? Yeah, I think that I'm supposed to be here."

Critical Race Theory Analysis

Tenet 1: Racism is endemic

Racism is normalized, to the point that the student-participants failed to even question or understand that there may be significance to the fact that their self-contained classroom is completely comprised of Black males, despite the classroom existing within

a school that reflects a more balanced racial makeup. Following race related questions, students were able to acknowledge the segregation that existed, but did not question or provide notable responses related directly to racism or potential race issues. Damarco reported that he liked that the classroom was a Black space and relayed feelings of comfort which the other participants agreed with, all except Ricky.

The normalcy of racism can potentially be called upon in the policies and practices that increase tracking into special education programs, as well as increase the number of disciplinary referrals for the functional representation of cultural Blackness. Student-participants, specifically Jaylin and Damarco, provided examples of how actions that they align with their culture, such as sagging pants and the performance of rap music have resulted in disciplinary referrals. Shad supported this notion and reported that the performance of traditionally white cultural norms was acceptable and closely aligned with the policies and procedures of their school.

> "Na, if these white kids do it, it ain't nothing but they always wanna talk about they calling my momma."

Dress-code, language and the idea of respect were frequently referenced by students. Jaylin stated,

> "Where I'm from you got to give respect to get respect and it ain't like that here. These people think you can talk to people any kinda way and that they gotta take it. No."

Damarco, who is frequently in trouble for dress-code violations asked,

> "Why I can't sag my pants? My momma don't care. They should be happy that I'm even here. Besides, them white fools be wearing them booty shorts shorter than the girls [chuckles] and they don't get in trouble. No cap."

Tenet 2: Interest Convergence

Milner's (2008) description of interest convergence stands out to me a great deal in the analysis of the disproportionate overrepresentation of Black males in special education. The development of special education in itself, could be viewed as the result of interests converging. Instead of creating or modifying curricular content or instructional methods to meet the increasingly diverse needs of diverse learning styles, special education was created to create a supplement to a public educational system that remains overwhelmingly unchanged and unchallenged since its inception.

The content of public education continues to center around the major content areas of reading, writing and mathematics. Instructional methods also remain strikingly similar, direct instruction in the form of lectures can still be viewed in classrooms across the nation, regardless of grade level or content area. The student-participants revealed this to be true in their comparison of the special education and general education classrooms; they state that all classrooms were teaching the same content standards and in similar ways. Teyvon, who recently returned to the self-contained classroom setting agreed with a nod and stated,

> "It really is all the same. School is school. It's just the kids that's different. And the class size."

Damarco stated that "all they do is talk" when referencing instructional methods. Shad mumbled in agreement and Jaylin further agreed and offered that he preferred a more

interactive classroom in which he was able to share his experiences and solve real problems, as opposed to problems that did not exist or impact his daily life.

Tenet 3: Race as a Social Construct

Research that suggests biological difference in the races has since been debunked and replaced with equally faulty notions of colorblindness, that fail to recognize the real consequences and discrimination that results from racial difference. Race may be the result of social constructs, defined by people that wish to include some and exclude others, but that does little to diminish the historical impact of racism and its continued existence.

Student-participants' discussion of race suggests that they understand that race is socially constructed, and at the same time champions whiteness. Damarco expressed that he felt as though his teachers wanted him to "act white," and he believed that had he done so, he could have fared better in the educational system. Students seemed to understand that race was impactful. The stories shared by students included examples of the ways in which they believed their racial identity seemingly impacted them in negative ways. Student-participant were able to share racialized experiences that they believed to be significant in their lives with Jaylin referencing what he believes to be constant police harassment in his apartment complex including the baseless evictions of Black families, and Ricky reminiscing on a time in which he was stopped questioned for smoking marijuana in the school bathroom while the "white boys in there just walked out."

Tenet 4: Intersectionality

Research into the concept of intersectionality reveals three major types of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). These types of intersectionality,

1. Structural intersectionality,
2. Political intersectionality, and
3. Representational intersectionality

Work together to define the ways in which the overlapping of multiple identities creates additional burden for its group members. For Crenshaw (1991), structural intersectionality refers to the ways that structures, or institutions, frame problems and problem solving effort to assist targeted groups. Political intersectionality refers to the idea that group membership in multiple disadvantaged groups often undermines or can create opposing political ideals, as is often the case with people that identify as both female and Black (Crenshaw, 1991). The final type of intersectionality refers to representational intersectionality which refers to the ways in which dominant images and narrative work together to further marginalize already marginalized populations.

Although these types of intersectionality were initially developed for use in the intersectional feminist movement, this concept has expanded to include various intersections but not that of Black male children. Based on the information gained from the student-participants, intersectionality could seemingly be applied to the overrepresentation of Black males in special education. In terms of structural intersectionality, the problem may exist with the structure of education and how it defines high incidence disabilities, such as emotional/behavioral disorders as well as learning disabilities. The current systems of evaluation only work to produce the mass induction of Black male students into the special education system. Once in the system, the structure of education does little to successfully remediate the problems that they have defined and set legally enforceable goals for. The limited academic and behavioral

success of the participants show that, despite being tracked into individualized programs, the programs have failed to truly address the individual needs of Black male students. The student-participants have been placed in and remained in self-contained classroom settings as early as age five. If the goal of special education is to remediate academic and behavioral concerns to the point that students no longer require placement in highly restrictive settings, the continuation of this setting shows limited effectiveness for the student-participants.

Political intersectionality is likely better analyzed from the perspective of parents of Black males with disabilities that struggle with balancing the needs of their multiple identities with those of their children. The issue of discipline has become a politicized legal issue as parents balance their desires for safe schools against the fact that zero-tolerance discipline negatively impacts children like theirs the most, that is Black males labeled as educationally and/or behaviorally deficit. The student-participants expressed that discipline was unevenly applied toward them; they expressed that they felt as though they were always in trouble, despite other students in the school displaying similar behaviors. Shad shared that his constant use of curse words generally landed him in trouble, but that he did not think that it should mean that would be "kicked out of school," as he referred to him recently being able to only attend school on alternating days. Jaylin shared that he had "mo write-up than anybody else on campus" for the school year. Student-participants also referred to a neighboring high school in the district with Jaylin reporting,

> "They be doing more worse stuff than us. Yeah, we fight but everybody over there doing and selling drugs so why they got more police here than over there?"

Representational intersectionality has the ability to negatively impact the lives of students through the eyes of their peers and the adults that they interact with. The students spoke to the stigma that comes with being classified as a self-contained special education student. This stigma impacts the experiences, successes and failures of students in the school setting, as they attempt to develop their own identities and navigate a structure of education that has already labeled them as a misfit. Teyvon, who has been intermittently placed in the self-contained classroom stated that he often skipped class or reported to class late to avoid being seen going into special education classes. Black males are represented in research, in society and in the media from a deficit lens that focuses on their shortcomings, while doing little to highlight their strengths, as a group or individually.

Tenet 5: Voice/Counter-narrative

The expression of the experiences of members of othered status provides a view into their worlds and works to deconstruct the narrow understanding of groups of people provided to us by dominant powers. There is also value in expressing oneself in ways that you deem meaningful. For students, the opportunity to talk openly about their feelings was in some way helpful, and possibly a welcome relief to the silencing of feelings that they reflected occur in other classroom and IEP meetings. Student-participants were eager to discuss their experiences and expressed that the conversations resulting from the focus group and interviews were interesting. Freddie was the only student-participant that did not eagerly share his stories, but this is representative of his shy personality type. At the conclusion of the focus group Ricky asked,

"Can we do this every day?"

The creation of a counter-narrative is even more important for marginalized populations. Without the production of counter-narratives, dominant discourses that view Black males from a deficit lens will continue to dominate research and the continued marginalization of this population. The research on the overrepresentation of Black males in special education is in abundance, yet research that humanizes Black males and seeks to understand the very real impact that this phenomenon has on them is virtually nonexistent. For teacher-researchers like myself, the development of counternarratives also works as a form of intervention and data collection that allows for us to gain information about our students, their stories and their identity formation.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

The stated purpose of this action research was to address the following question: What are the educational and placement experiences of Black male students impacted by disproportionate over-representation in self-contained special education classrooms? This question was addressed through the following research objectives:

1. To identify the reasons that Black males believe that they have been placed in self-contained special education settings, using their voice.
2. To identify themes that help to explain the experiences of Black male students placed in self-contained special education classrooms.
3. To analyze the disproportionate overrepresentation of Black male students in self-contained special education classrooms through the lens of CRT, based on the voice and lived experiences of members of the targeted population.

To best answer the research question, qualitative methods in the form of a review of records, a focus group and semi-structured interviews were used. This allowed me to attempt to understand the educational experiences of the student-participants and the reasons in which they felt they were placed in the self-contained setting and to analyze the information that they provided through the theoretical lens of critical race theory.

Summary of Research Findings

Based on the integration of student responses, the themes of stigmatization, discomfort and apathy became evident and were applied to the tenets of critical race theory in an attempt to understand disproportionate overrepresentation while centering the potential impact of race. Student-participant's stories and words allowed for the tenets of CRT to be explored and applied to their personal lived experiences and life histories. The tenet of race as a social construct and the concept of interest convergence seemed to best fit with the voiced experiences of the students. The students spoke to a devaluing of the performance of race, specifically that of Black culture in the school setting and how this performance created the academic and behavioral concerns that potentially led to their to initial and continued placement in the self-contained special education setting.

Suggestions for Future Research

Continued research in the area of special education is necessary to better understand the ever-evolving needs of public education and the increasingly diverse population of students that it vows to serve. Conducting this research led me to the conclusion that while disproportionate overrepresentation in special education has been well-documented, all other areas of special education research are seemingly lacking, including that of student experience, placement, assessment and empirically sound interventions. More research needs to be done to understand the identification and assessment processes that allow for such great numbers of Black males to be tracked into special education and placed in restrictive special education programs. We also need to better understand the system of special education and the seemingly ineffective

interventions that it employs which effectively maintain self-contained special education placement over extended periods of time for Black male students. It was always my belief that the unstated goal of professional special educators was to work themselves out of jobs by successfully working their students out of the need for special education settings and supports.

Quantitative research methods have been useful in identifying and naming the phenomenon of disproportionate representation, but additional qualitative research is needed to inform those numbers. The voice and educational experiences of the children and families placed in restrictive special education settings need to be heard and understood to serve as the foundation for future research and to provide empirical basis for the daily praxis of educational practitioners. Black voices matter and the void of those voices and experiences work to further marginalize. In addition to my personal research, Rogers' (2002) work shows us that the voices of children and their families are often limited in the structure of meetings, as well as in the power that is often withheld as educators use educational jargon to provide families with structured options, limited performance data and a strengths based perspective that minimizes deficit areas.

Reflection and Action Plan

Partaking in this research has been both difficult and enlightening. Although I did not enter the process with a host of beliefs about the impact of race in special education experience and placement, those that I did hold were somewhat validated by the process. The most significant belief held and validated by student voice is the idea that race does impact the educational experiences and restrictive placement of students, specifically Black male students in special education. As a part of my personal action

plan, I hope to use the data gathered in this study to become a better teacher. For me, becoming a better teacher will come in the form of collecting additional data, challenging status quo through the translation of student voice and providing interventions that are culturally relevant and effective.

I plan to make a more concerted effort to build relationships with students. These processes of practitioner inquiry and counternarrative development have aided in the development of more meaningful relationships with my students and by extension, their families. Ladson-Billings (1999) discusses the importance of relationship building in the process of successfully educating African-American students and I believe that this may be true. During the data collection process, I learned information that I may not have otherwise known about my students and grew closer to understanding them, their needs and their experiences. This newly developed understanding can go a long way in working with other stakeholders to ensure that students' basic needs are first met. I plan to continue having these targeted, semi-structured focus groups and interviews with all of my students.

Understanding the students that I serve helps me to be of better service. In the interview process, I learned that Jaylin is reluctant to attend class based on the perception that he is "slow" by his general education peers. For Jaylin, and future students like Jaylin, it is reasonable to allow for an additional two minutes of transition time for him to avoid this perception and any peer conflict that may follow. From Damarco, I came to understand that his wearing of headphones was not an effort to shut down or tune the teacher out but rather an effort to ignore the behavioral infractions of other students. This presented itself as a strength held by Damarco in his ability to attempt to perform in

expected ways. It also works to help implement non-verbal systems of check-in with Damarco to ensure that he is present for instructional time without questioning his use of headphones. I learned from all of the student-participants that my classroom represents a safe-place, a place in which students can be themselves and be understood by me. I plan to continue to emphasize notions of community within my classroom while also being vulnerable with my students by sharing and valuing in my personal experiences in authentic ways.

I also began to view the students through a different lens, one that did not center their academic and behavioral deficits, but rather their stories. Their stories allowed me to understand and acknowledge that my students are strong, caring, resilient and intelligent in ways that are not generally noted and honored by educational structures that value grades over lived experiences. Ricky's greatest strength is in his ability to advocate for himself and others; he understands that differences exist and that there are unfair advantages afforded to some groups. He is passionate about making everyone feel included and valued. Jaylin's resilience following the murder of his father and his inconsistent living arrangements is unmatched. His ability to smile the most genuine of smiles and maintain interpersonal relationships around campus through his personal struggles is a testament to his strength. Damarco's ability to navigate the school and classroom in ways that limit his negative interactions with peers is intelligent and demonstrates a strong understanding of self.

The greatest takeaway has to be knowing that my students are not apathetic, but are more likely lost in a system that they do not understand. I have found that educators, myself included, tend to immediately believe that students are apathetic when they do not

complete assignments or do not meet our usually ill-defined behavioral expectations. Counter-narrative production as a means of getting to know our students and interrupting baseless assumptions about students can aid in the understanding of student performance inside and outside of the classroom.

I plan to make greater use of instructional time by explicitly teaching students and parents about the special education and IEP process, including processes related to assessment and placement. This will be done so that they may feel empowered and gain the necessary skills to advocate for themselves. Students and parents need to be privy to the information and the language that is so often used in classrooms and meetings that result in referral to and placement in special education.

I may also place an even greater emphasis on the affective needs of students. Students understood that their behavioral expression was at times a mismatch for the school environment but were not articulate about the changes that needed to be made. A greater focus on affective education and social functioning may better prepare students to perform in ways that are more acceptable based on a given environment. In my classroom, this will include explicit teaching of school-wide demands and specific strategies to be used to mediate conflict. I believe that it is also important to make clear with students the differences that may exist in behavioral expectations and the culture that informs those notions. It is my hope that such discussion with students regarding cultural mismatches will help them to adjust their behavior while also calling out the structures that value and punish some races over others.

Limitations

There were several limitations reflected in this study, with the most noticeable being the sample size. A focus group of seven and the development of four subsequent counter-narratives is not generalizable and cannot inform practice too far beyond the reach of my classroom. I recognize that a larger and randomized study sample would be required to inform educational research on a broad scale. While this is not the goal of action research, it is typically viewed as a factor in how we value educational research.

A lack of similar and related research in the area of study presented a major limitation. The review of the literature and even the structure of the methods were limited based on a dearth of research that looks specifically into the educational experiences of Black male students in special education. Not one study represented the experiences of this population of students placed in self-contained settings. Much of the reviewed research was somewhat dated and I struggled to find research that was relevant and specific to my areas of interest. It seems that while the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in self-contained classrooms is well-defined, the attempts to understand and mediate the disproportionate overrepresentation is of limited interest to educators and educational researchers. It seems we are most interested in supporting the deficit model and maintaining the high percentages of Black male students in restrictive special education settings.

I represent the final limitation. As an insider, one who works with and advocates for the students who participated, I may have impacted student response in very real ways. With any self-reported data collection method, there is the potential that the participants are not being truthful or have varied perceptions of events. The limitation of

self-reported data may only be intensified when the interviewer is also one that provided grades and progress monitoring data for the interviewee.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the experiences and stories of Black males disproportionately placed in self-contained special education settings. Through the use of critical race theory, this study centered race, as a foundation and as a tool by which to analyze the continued overrepresentation of Black males in high-incidence disability categories and placed in self-contained special education settings. The research suggests that race does matter and that it impacts the daily lives of Black males and how they perceive their placement and overall educational experiences. Now that we know, what are we going to do about it?

Educators need to be willing to work alongside families and students to become interrupters of the problems that we find in our practice. Without interruption, students will continue to fare poorly in systems of education, especially Black male students in special education. We must interrupt the trajectories that research has so clearly defined for us, the trajectories that land Black male students with high-incidence disability types in prison or dead at a young age. It is my hope that more research will be done in this area to help better understand, treat and provide a voice to the students that are most impacted by continued rates of overrepresentation. Even more so, it is my hope that we use the information to create and uphold our own voices in support of students and in ways that work to interrupt the cycles of overrepresentation and poor lifelong outcomes that continue to negatively impact the lives of Black male students and their families. I hope that we begin to find value in diversity, not only of skin color but also in voice,

lived experiences and other ways of knowing. I hope that education becomes the place that we imagine it to be.

REFERENCES

Angelov, A. D. S. & Anderson, S. I. (2013). On the outside looking in: an African American family's experience in an Individualized Education Plan meeting. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher, 25*(3), 1-21.

Banks, J. (2014). Barriers and support to postsecondary transition: case studies of African American students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 35*(1), 28-39.

Banks, J. (2017). "These people are never going to stop labeling me": educational experiences of African American male students labeled with learning disabilities. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 50*(1), 96-107.

Barbarin, O. A. (2015). Parental practices and developmental challenges of boys of color: Opportunities for early intervention. *Zero to Three, 35*(3), 9-17.

Bell Jr., D. A. (1995). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest convergence dilemma. In Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G. & Thomas, K. (Eds.), *Critical race theory: the key writing that formed the movement* (pp. 20-28). The New Press.

Berry, T. R. & Candis, M. R. (2013). Cultural identity and education: a critical race perspective. *Educational Foundations,* 43-64.

Boyd, B. A. & Correa, V. I. (2005). Developing a framework for reducing the cultural clash between African American parents and the special education system. *Multicultural Perspectives, 7*(2), 3-11.

Capper, C. A. (2015). The 20th-year anniversary of critical race theory in education: Implication for leading to eliminate racism. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 51*(5), 791-833.

Cartledge, G., Kea, C. D., Watson, M., & Oif, A. (2016). Special education disproportionality: A review of response to intervention and culturally relevant pedagogy. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners, 16(*1), 29-49.

Causton-Theoharis, J., Theoharis, G., Orsati, F., & Cosier, M. (2011). Does self-contained special education deliver on its promises? A critical inquiry into research and practice. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 24*(2) 61-78.

Clark, E. J. (2007). Conduct Disorders in African American adolescent males: The perceptions that lead to over-diagnosis and placement in special programs. *Alabama Counseling Association Journal, 33*(2), 1-7.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Coles, A. L. and Knowles, J. G. (2001). *Lives in context: The art of life history research* (pp. 41-43). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Conrad, N. K., Gong, Y., Sipp, L., & Wright, L. (2004). Using Text Talk as a Gateway to Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 31*(3), 187-192.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241-1299.

Dana, N. F. (2013). *Digging deeper into action research: A teacher inquirer's field guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance. *American Education Research Journal, 54*(1), p. 127-166.

Dixson, A. D. & Anderson, C. R. (2018). Where are we? Critical race theory in education 20 years later. *Peabody Journal of Education, 93*(1), 121-131.

Echevarria, J. Powers, K. & Elliot, J. (2004). Promising practices for curbing disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. *Issues in Teacher Education 13*(1), 19-33.

Ford, D. Y. & Russo, C. J. (2016). Historical and legal overview of special education overrepresentation: Access and equity denied. *Multiple Voices, 16*(1), 50-57.

I*ssues in Special Education, 13(*1), 19-33.

Frawley, T. (2005). Gender bias in the classroom: Current controversies and implications for teachers. *Childhood Education, 81*(4), 221.

Goswani, D., Lewis, C., Rutherford, M., & Waff, D. (2009). Teacher inquiry: Approaches to language and literacy research. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Harris-Murri, N., King, K., & Rostenberg, D. (2006). Reducing Disproportionate Minority Representation in Special Education Programs for Students with Emotional Disturbances: Toward a Culturally Responsive Response to Intervention Model. *Education & Treatment Of Children, 29*(4), 779-799.

Jay, M. (2003). Critical race theory, multicultural education, and the hidden curriculum of hegemony. *Multicultural Perspectives, 5*(4), p.3-9.

Jordan, K. A. (2008). Teachers' discursive constructions of disability: implications for Black urban youth. *The International Journal of Learning, 14*(10), 5-14.

Kauffman, J. M. (2014). Past, present, and future in EBD and special education. *Advances in Learning & Behavioral Disabilities, 27,* 63-87.

Kincaid, A. P. & Sullivan, A. L. (2017). Parsing the relations of race and socioeconomic status in special education disproportionality. *Remedial and Special Education, 38*(3), 159-170.

Kindzierski, C. M., O'Dell, R., Marable, M. A., Raimondi, S. L. (2013). You tell us: How well are we preparing teachers for a career in classrooms serving children with emotional disabilities? *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties, 18*(2), 179-195.

Kleinfeld, J. (2009). The state of American boyhood. Gender Issues, 26(2), 113-129.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2011). Boyz to men? Teaching to restore Black boys' childhood. *Race, Ethnicity & Education, 14*(1), 7-15.

Ladson-Billings. G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice. 34*(3), 159-165.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children.* John Wiley & Sons.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2005). The evolving role of critical race theory in educational scholarship. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), p. 115-119.

Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47-68.

Lane, K. L., Barton-Arwood, S. M., Nelson, J. R., & Wehby, J. (2008). Academic performance of students with emotional and behavioral disorders served in a self-contained setting. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 17*(1), 43-62.

Lane, K. L., Wehby, J. H., Little, M. A., & Cooley, C. (2005). Academic, social and behavioral profiles of students with emotional and behavioral disorders education in self-contained classrooms and self-contained schools: Part I--Are the more alike than different?. *Behavioral Disorders, 30*(4), 349-361.

Linde, C. (1993). *Life stories: The creation of coherence*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Maggin, D. M., Wehby, J. H., Partin, T. C. M., Robertson, R. & Oliver, R. M. (2011). A comparison of the instructional context for students with behavioral issues enrolled in self-contained and general education classrooms. *Behavioral Disorders*, *36*(2), 84-99.

Mattison, R. E. & Blader, J. C. (2013). What affects academic functioning in secondary special education students with serious emotional and/or behavioral problems?. *Behavioral Disorders, 38*(4), 201-211.

McCarther, S. M., & Davis, D. M. (2017). Culturally relevant pedagogy twenty – plus years later. *American Educational History Journal, 44*(1), p. 103-113.

McDougal, S. (2009). "Break it down": One of the cultural and stylist instructional preferences of Black males. *The Journal of Negro Education, 78*(4), 432-440.

McLeod, J. & Thomson, R. (2009). *Researching social change.* London: Sage.

Merrell, K. W. & Walker, H. M. (2004). Deconstructing a definition: Social maladjustment versus emotional disturbance and moving the EBD field forward. *Psychology in the Schools, 41*(8), 899-910.

Mertler, C.A. (2013). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educator*s (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Milner IV, H. R. (2008). Critical race theory and interest convergence as analytic tools in teacher education policies and practices. Journal of Teacher Education, 59(4), 332-346.

Monroe, C. R. (2006). African American boys and the discipline gap: Balancing educators' uneven hand. *Educational Horizons, 84*(2), 102-111.

Morgan, P. L. & Farkas, G. (2016). Evidence and implication of racial and ethnic disparities in emotional and behavioral disorders identification and treatment. *Behavioral Disorders, 41*(2), 122-131.

Nasir, N. S., Ross, K. M., McKinney de Royston, M., Givens, J., & Bryant, J. N. (2013). Dirt on my record: Rethinking disciplinary practices in an all-black, all-male alternative class. *Harvard Educational Review, 83*(3), 489-512.

Oliver, R. M., & Reschly, D. J. (2010). Special education teacher preparation in classroom management: Implications for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders, 35*(3), 188-199.

Othman, L. B. (2018). The problem of disproportional representation of student from minority races in special education. *International Journal of Special Education, 33*(1), p. 171-183.

Piechura-Couture, K., Heins, E. & Tichenor, M. M. (2011). The boy factor: Can single-gender classes reduce the over-representation of boys in special education?. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 38(*4), 255-263.

Raines, T. C., Dever, B. V., Kamphaus, R. W. & Roach, A. T. (2012). Universal screening for behavioral and emotional risk: A promising method for reducing disproportionate placement in special education. *The Journal of Negro Education, 81*(3), 283-296.

Rashid, H. M. (2009). From brilliant baby yo child placed at risk: The perilous path of African American boys in early childhood education. *Journal of Negro Education, 78*(3), 347-358.

Riley, T. (2014). Boys are like puppies, girls aim to please: How teachers' gender stereotypes may influence students placement decision and classroom teaching. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 60*(1), 1-21.

Robinson, S. A. (2013). Educating Black males with dyslexia. Interdisciplinary *Journal of Teaching and Learning, 3*(3), 159-174.

Rogers, R. (2002). Through the eyes of the institution: A critical discourse analysis of decision making in two special education meetings. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 33*(2), 213-237.

Rueter, J. A., & Trice, J.N. (2011). From high school to juvenile corrections: The downward spiral. *International Journal on School Disaffection, 8*(2), 34-41.

Serpell, Z., Hayling, C. C., Stevenson, H. & Kern, L. (2009). Cultural considerations in the development of school-based interventions for African American adolescent boys with emotional and behavioral disorders. *The Journal of Negro Education, 78*(3), 321-332.

Stringer, E. T. (2014). *Action research* (4th ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Solorzano, D. & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical race methodology: counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 23-44.

Teagarden, J. M., Zabel, R. H., & Kaff, M. S. (2015). Life as the middle child: A conversation with Mary Margaret Kerr. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 51*(2), 126-130.

Tomasi, S. F. & Weinberg, S. L. (1999). Classifying children as LD: An analysis of current practice in an urban setting. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 22*(1), 31-42.

Tucker, J. A. (1980). Ethnic proportions in classes for the learning disabled: issues in nonbiased assessment. *The Journal of Special Education, 14*(1), 93-105.

West-Olatunji, C. A., Baker, J. C. & Brooks, M. (2006). African American adolescent males: Giving voice to their educational experiences. *Multicultural Perspectives, 8*(4), 3-9.

Wiley, A. L., Siperstein, G. N., & Forness, S. R. (2011). School context and the academic and behavioral progress of students with emotional disturbance. *Behavioral Disorders*, *36*(3), 172-184.

Wood, F. H. (2001). Looking back-looking ahead: Programs for students with emotional and behavioral problems at the millennium. *Preventing School Failure, 45*(2), 58-64.

Yell, M. L. (2019). The law and special education. Pearson.

Young, E. (2010). Challenges to conceptualizing and actualizing culturally relevant pedagogy: How viable is the theory in classroom practice? *Journal of Teacher Education 61*(3), p. 248-260.

Zhang, D. & Katsiyannis, A. (2002). Minority representation in special education: a persistent challenge. *Remedial and Special Education, 23*(3), 180-187.

APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

This list of questions was used as an outline for the semi-structured focus group. Students were allowed to speak openly in responding and where appropriate, the student-participants were asked to expand upon their responses.

1. Who is special education for and not for?
2. Who makes decisions about who should be placed in special education and where they are placed? Do you agree?
3. What is taught in self-contained classrooms?
4. Have you noticed the racial makeup of your school and classrooms?
5. What are the behavioral expectations of school? Do they differ from home?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

This list of questions was used as an outline for the semi-structured individual interviews. Students were allowed to speak openly in responding and where appropriate, the student-participants were asked to expand upon their responses.

1. How did you get placed into a self-contained classroom?
2. Do you feel as though you are supposed to be special education?
3. What are IEP meetings like for you?
4. Who attends your IEP meetings?
5. Do you and your parents understand what is going on in IEP meetings?

APPENDIX C

INSTUITIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA
OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH
DECLARATION of NOT RESEARCH

X'andria Sutton
College of Education
Department of Instruction & Teacher Education / Curriculum & Instruction
Wardlaw
Columbia, SC 29208

Re: **Pro00086869**

Dear Mrs. X'andria Sutton:

This is to certify that research study entitled ***Culturally Relevant Teaching and the Educational Experience in Special Education*** was reviewed on **3/25/2019** by the Office of Research Compliance, which is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). The Office of Research Compliance, on behalf of the Institutional Review Board, has determined that the referenced research study is not subject to the Protection of Human Subject Regulations in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 et. seq.

No further oversight by the USC IRB is required. However, the investigator should inform the Office of Research Compliance prior to making any substantive changes in the research methods, as this may alter the status of the project and require another review.

If you have questions, contact Lisa M. Johnson at lisaj@mailbox.sc.edu or (803) 777-6670.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
ORC Assistant Director and IRB Manager